

## Heroes, Kings and Monsters in a Cave Under the Mountain (Indo-Europeans and the Caucasus)

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The paper begins with the unique motif of the “Wheel of Time Revolving in an Underground Cave” that appears in both the Indian Mahābhārata and the Armenian epic “Daredevils of Sassoun”. This is followed by a review of stories about characters confined or asleep inside a cave from the Caucasus, the Balkans and Central/Western Europe. Certain episodes from the Indian epics Mbh and Rāmāyaṇa are for the first time recognized as belonging to the same circle of plots and motifs. In all stories of characters imprisoned or sleeping in a cave, time passes in a peculiar way, divided into cycles by the constant repetition of specific events. The author suggests that all these myths and legends are based on the strong link in human consciousness between the image of a cave and the mytho-ritual complex of ideas: “birth – death – rebirth”. The similarity between stories of this type in Caucasian and Indo-European traditions may be explained by contacts between Indo-Europeans and Caucasians at different times, starting from the period of Proto-Indo-European linguistic unity.

### The Wheel of Time/Fate in a Cave (India – Armenia)

The comparative analysis of the Indian Mahābhārata (Mbh) and the Armenian epic *Sasna crēr* (“Daredevils of Sassoun”) (Vassilkov 2019) has, among other similarities, revealed a unique and impressive image common to both traditions.

In the Mbh (Mbh1. 3.147-151, 166-168, 172-173)<sup>1</sup> the young Brahmin, Uttanka, penetrates through a fissure into a large cave in the underground world of Snakes (*nāgaloka*) where he sees a

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<sup>1</sup>All Mbh references are to the Critical edition (Mahābhārata 1933 – 1966.)

large wheel with 360 spokes and 24 “joints” (*parvan*)<sup>2</sup> or just 12 spokes<sup>3</sup>, which constantly revolves turned by six boys. There are also two young women making a cloth on a loom; they continuously interlace the warp with black and white threads of weft<sup>4</sup>. The epithet defining the word for ‘warp’ (*tantram*) is *viśvarūpaṃ*, translated by J.A.B. van Buitenen (1973: 52) as ‘colorful’ but may also be understood as ‘having universal form’, ‘representing the whole universe’<sup>5</sup>. This meaning is in line with the last part of the verse Mbh 1. 3.151, from which we learn that the two divine weavers in the process of their work “cause to turn round and round” not just the threads but all the worlds and all living beings within them.

Later Uttanka’s teacher explains to him that the wheel he saw is the Wheel of the Year with its 12 spokes (months), and the six boys are the six seasons (*ṛtu*)<sup>6</sup>. The Wheel of the Year is an aspect of *kālacakra*, the Wheel of Time, popular in the epic image representing Kāla “(cyclical) Time”, the highest principle of the heroic world view. Kāla’s “turns” (*paryaya*) predestine all events in the world and the destinies of humans. The orders of Kāla are fulfilled by two epic gods who control fate: Dhātā (Dhātṛ) – the ‘Placer’, “Fixer (of destiny)” and Vidhātā (Vidhātṛ) – the ‘Apportioner’ or ‘Disposer’. It is not surprising that Uttanka’s teacher sees in the two female weavers the forms of these two gods<sup>7</sup>. However, it can hardly be doubted that these two women are by origin the ancient Indo-Aryan and Indo-

<sup>2</sup> *trīṇy arpitāny atra śatāni madhye śaṣṭiś ca nityaṃ carati dhruve 'smin / cakre caturviṃśatiparvayoge śaḍ yat kumārāḥ parivartayanti //* (Mbh 1.3.150) The word *parvan* has another meaning: ‘fortnight’ i.e. “half a month”.

<sup>3</sup> *tatra ca mayā cakram dṛṣṭam dvādaśāraṃ* (Mbh 1.3.168A).

<sup>4</sup> *...athā 'paśyat striyau tantre adhiropya paṭam vāyantiyau //* (Mbh 1.3.147A).

*tasmimś ca tantre kṛṣṇāḥ sitāś ca tantavaḥ* / (Mbh 1.3.148A).

*tantram ce'daṃ viśvarūpaṃ yuvatyau vāyatas tantūn satataṃ vartayantiyau / kṛṣṇān sitāṃś caiva vivartayantiyau bhūtāny aśaśraṃ bhuvanāni caiva //* (Mbh 1.3.151).

<sup>5</sup> The epithet *viśvarūpa* is used in this meaning in the description of Uttanka’s other vision in the 14<sup>th</sup> book of the epic: *sa dadarśa mahātmānaṃ viśvarūpaṃ mahābhujam* “he saw the One-of-great-soul (*mahātman*), having universal form, mighty-armed” (Mbh 14.54.5).

<sup>6</sup> *yad api tac cakram dvādaśāraṃ śaṭkumārāḥ parivartayanti te ṛtavaḥ śaṭ samvatsaraś cakram* (Mbh 1.3.173A).

<sup>7</sup> *ye te striyau dhātā vidhātā ca* / “These two women are Dhātā and Vidhātā” (Mbh 1.3.172.B).

European goddesses of fate, usually spinners or weavers<sup>8</sup>. In Indo-European traditions such goddesses tend to be linked with the underworld like, for example, the Hittite goddesses *Ištuštaya* and *Papaya* who spin and ply the thread of the king's life in the underworld; the South Slavic *sudzhenitse*, goddesses of fate who sometimes live in mountain caves; the witches (successors of the ancient Norns) who tell Macbeth his destiny in a cave (Act IV, Scene I), etc. But it is the Wheel of Time revolving in an underground cave that is most important to us here.

Turning now to the Armenian parallel, we are unfortunately unable to quote a particular text neither in Armenian, nor in English translation. The epic "Daredevils of Sassoun" continued even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be transmitted orally as a multitude of tales and their variants. The motif of the Wheel of Fate in a cave is absent in both the collated text published in 1939 under the title "David of Sassoun"<sup>9</sup> and in the volume of recorded oral tales translated into Russian (Armyanskij narodnyj epos 2004). My only source is the book of the eminent philologist, folklorist and historian of literature Manuk Abeghyan (Abeghian 1899) who in turn quotes from a rare version of the tale of Mher the Younger, recorded and published by another Armenian philologist and folklorist,

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. e.g., West 2007: 379-385. It is noteworthy that M.L. West when demonstrating the presence of the goddesses of Fate who spin and weave human destinies in IE mythological traditions of Europe and Anatolia remarks: "...there are no spinster Fate-goddesses in the Vedas" (West 2007: 379, 380). However there is a verse in the first of two Wedding hymns that form the 14<sup>th</sup> Book of the Atharvaveda (Śaunaka):

*yā ākr̥ntann avayan yās ca tatnire yā devīr antān abhito 'dadanta /  
tās tvā devīr jarase samvyayantv āyusmātī 'dam paridhatsva vāsaḥ //*

"The goddesses (*devīḥ*) who spun (*yā ākr̥ntan*), who wove (*avayan*), who spread out [the cloth], who stretched on both sides the ends, may those goddesses clothe you with [life until] old age! As one having long life [now], put on this garment!" (AVŚ 14.1.45). The Gobhila Gr̥hyasūtra (2.1.18) elucidates the ritual context in which this verse ought to be pronounced: the husband, in the course of the wedding ceremony, had to put on his wife a new garment which had not yet been washed, with the verse: "The goddesses who spun, who wove", and so on.

<sup>9</sup>This popularized text in its Armenian and Russian versions (David Sasunskij 1939) served for many decades as the basis for translations and literary renderings of the Armenian epic in other languages.

Bishop Garegin Srvandztians (1874: 134). Here is a quotation from M. Abeghyan's book (translated from German):

In contemporary Islamic Persia the notion of Fate is connected with *čarkh* – the heavenly wheel and falak – the sky with its circle of planets. The Armenian բակտ *bakht* ‘destiny; happy lot’, often used since old times, is an Iranian loanword. However, in Armenian dialects nowadays ֆալակ *falak* or, more often, շառիֆ ֆալակ *c'arkhi falak* is also used in the sense of the Wheel of Fate. The latter is usually perceived as being separate from the heavens. This view finds its best expression in the tale of Mher (Srvandztians 1874: 134), the mightiest among the heroes of the epic *Sasna c'ēr*, “The Heroes of Sassoun”. He is sequestered together with his horse, in a mountain cave<sup>10</sup> near the city of Van. It is believed that all the treasures of the world are hoarded together inside; also standing there is *c'arkhi falak*, the Wheel of the World, or the Wheel of Fate which incessantly revolves apportioning humans their destinies. Mher is watching this wheel fixedly. When it stops, he will leave the cave and destroy the world. (Abeghian 1899: 51)

The description of a wheel by Uttanka that he saw in the underworld (Mbh 1.3.150) is nothing but a variant of the “Year riddle”, well-known from the Vedas (RV 1.164. 11-14, 48; AV. 9.9.13; 10.8.4,5) and the Epic (Mbh 1.3.64-65; 3.133.21-22). The concept of the year revolving as a wheel and returning constantly to the same point is implied in some formulas of the Greek epic, and this gave M.L. West grounds to suggest that the “wheel of the year” image may be derived from Proto-Indo-European (PIE) mythology (West 2007: 371). In Iran the wheel of the year/time became more tightly linked to the concept of Fate and was placed in heaven, probably influenced by Babylonian astrology. In Zurvanism, *Spīhr*, the wheel of the

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<sup>10</sup>Mher the Younger, a fighter against evil and injustice, defies his father's will. The father then puts a curse on him. The earth can no longer bear the weight of Mher and his horse, therefore the hero has to retire to a cave in the Rock of Van.

starry firmament, is the Body of the highest God, Zurvan (Time); through Spīhr and the signs of the Zodiac the destiny of humans, fixed by Zurvan, is apportioned on earth (Zaehner 1972: 111, 161). This is the source of the concept of *čarkh-i falak*, a heavenly "roulette" that determines human destiny in the later Persian tradition. The Armenian image of the Wheel of Time revolving in a cave stands in sharp contrast with Iranian ideas and has parallels nowhere else except India.

There is a choice of possible hypothetical explanations for this Indo-Armenian parallel. Firstly, we may see in both cases the image of the underground wheel of Time/Fate as a survival from the PIE period. However, the "Year riddle" that uses the image of the wheel implies acquaintance with the *spoked* wheel which was unlikely during the period of PIE unity<sup>11</sup>. We may also assume that this image in both traditions was inherited from the period of the Greek-Armenian-Indo-Iranian dialect group postulated by many authors<sup>12</sup> (Godel 1975: 132; Schmidt 1980: 39; Mallory 1989: 155; Clackson 1994: 202; Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1995: 463, 543, 330-350 [Fig. 2]; Watkins 2001: 57; Mallory & Adams 2007: 73 [Fig. 5.2], 79; Schmidt 2007: 38ff; Martirosyan 2013: passim; Kim 2018: 247, 248, 263, 264). However, in light of our present knowledge this conjecture cannot be supported by any arguments.

In this article I put forward, and shall try to substantiate, another explanation. The image of the Wheel of Time revolving in a cave might have emerged in India and Armenia due to parallel development from a very archaic mythological concept shared by both traditions. I am referring here to the strong associative link between the image of a cave and the perception of time as a sequence of cycles. This idea, very old and widespread, was however realized in a particular circle of folklore motifs and plots almost exclusively by the Caucasian and Indo-European traditions. Below is a list of stories about characters chained/confined/sleeping in caves from these traditions. Time in all these stories passes in an idiosyncratic

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<sup>11</sup>The spoked wheel (of a chariot) appeared first in the Middle Bronze Age period, ca. 2100–1700 BCE, at Sintashta in the southern Urals region (Johnson 2017: 340).

<sup>12</sup>These branches of Indo-European shared some later innovations absent in other, "peripheral", Indo-European dialects.

way: it is divided into cycles by constant repetition of specific events. The list naturally begins with the tale of Mher because the story of his seclusion in the Rock of Van indicated the direction for my research.

### Heroes or Monsters Confined in Caves (The Caucasus)

- Mher, according to many variants of his tale, is a positive figure, defender of Sassoun from its enemies. His seclusion is voluntary, which is why he, unlike chthonic characters imprisoned in a cave<sup>13</sup>, does not intermittently struggle to get out, but there is a regularity of another kind connected with his sojourn inside. Every year on the Holiday of Roses (*Vardavar*, the Transfiguration) and on Ascension Day he appears on horseback to discover whether or not the earth can hold him again (see Footnote 10).
- The image of another Armenian epic hero, King Artavazd is ambivalent. On the one hand he is a wise ruler, defender of the country, fighting demonic neighbours. In other versions he himself is partly demonic (a *vishap*). Cursed by his father (like Mher), he was kidnapped by evil spirits (*k'aj*) while hunting and locked in a cave in Mount Ararat. The "vicious" Artavazd tries to break his chains and get out of the cave to destroy the world while two dogs lick or gnaw at them. By the year's end the chains become very thin, but before New Year's Day (or every Saturday), on leaving to go home, the Armenian blacksmiths strike the anvil with hammers three times and the chains regain their strength (Abegyan 1948: 54-56).
- The story of Artavazd has a parallel in Iranian mythology with which it may be genetically linked. I am referring to the Iranian myth of a dragon Aži Dahāka and its quasi-

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<sup>13</sup>As we shall see, a character confined in a cave is sometimes a *mythic* figure: chthonic monster, enemy of the gods or unsuccessful pretender to the throne of heaven. In some cases, he may be the highest god himself, whose power is temporarily usurped by a demonic antagonist. An *epic* hero as defender of his tribe or nation is as a rule characterized positively, though he may be put in a cave as punishment for challenging a higher god/God or for open rebellion; so he still retains some features of a chthonic monster and his nature is ambivalent (as in the case of Artavazd). *Quasi-historical, legendary* kings asleep in a cave under a mountain usually possess only positive qualities.

historical transformation into a human king in the epic legend of King Zaḥḥāk. After defeat, depending on the version, either in dragon or human form, he is locked in a cave in the Demavend (Damāwand) mountain where he must stay until the end of Time. The chained Zaḥḥāk tries to break his fetters, causing earthquakes (Carnoy 1917: 265-266, 320-323; Hinnels 1985: 39-40, 54, 68, 114-117). It is worth noting that the leading role in the revolt against the tyranny of Zaḥḥāk is played by the *blacksmith* Kāve (Daryaei 1999).

- The Georgian hero Amirani is locked in a cave and chained to a pole as a punishment for his struggle against God. Once every seven years the cave opens and Amirani is visible inside. A dog weakens his chain by licking it, but on Passion Thursday or Christmas Eve the blacksmiths (enemies he had sworn to destroy) strike the anvil with their hammers and the chain becomes thicker again. In another variant from East Georgia, Amirani shakes the pole, but at the moment he is ready to pull it out, a wagtail lands on it. Amirani strikes the top of the pole with a hammer, the bird flies away and the pole stands firm (Chikovani 1966: 111-112; Hunt 2012: 353-354).
- In a similar way a Wagtail regularly destroys the attempts of Abryskil, the God-fighter of the Abkhaz epic, to break his chains. In another version a dog and a cat lick at his chain, but an old witch who is guarding the hero in the cave interferes. She says to the chain: "Be strong again!", and the chain becomes strong (Gartskiya 1892: 34-38; Dirr 1922: 242-246; Olrik 1922: 167-168; Dzhapua 2003: 110-111, 327, 335; Hunt 2012: 349-350). A bird also appears in the Adyghe tales of the chained Old Man, which feature blacksmiths as well (Colarusso 2002: 168-169; Dzhapua 2003: 114; Hunt 2012: 355-356). There are other Caucasian versions of the same story (Miller 1883: 101-102, 105, 107-108; Berezkin & Duvakin n.d., motif C33: Caucasus-Asia Minor).

### **Heroes or Monsters Confined in Caves or on Rocks (The Balkans and Central Europe)**

Another region where similar motifs can be found is the Balkans.

- Here the Serbian Marco Kralevich who stays in a cave has a lot in common with the Armenian Mher. The difference is that Marco is a historical figure. He is definitely a positive character, therefore nobody tries to keep him confined. He sleeps in the cave and will leave of his own accord in due course (Hartland 1891: 218). Remarkably, Marco, like Mher, goes out of his cave on certain holidays.
- Another Serbian character, King Dukljan or Dukljanin, is a demonic figure and adversary of God. Dukljan is chained and constantly gnaws on his chains, and each year around Christmas time nearly breaks free to destroy the world. But then Gypsy (Romani) blacksmiths strike the anvil with their hammers, and the chains become thick again (Kulishich et al. 1970:122).
- In Albanian folklore, a devil is tied to a rock by a huge chain. He gnaws on the chain during the year, and by Holy Saturday the chain grows almost thin enough to snap, but on Holy Sunday Christ comes and fastens the devil to the rock with a new one (Miller 1883: 114).
- The famous Greek myth of Prometheus may be viewed as a Balkan variant of the story about a chained hero. Many scholars have studied the myth of this rebellious Titan against the background of its numerous Caucasian parallels (Miller 1883; Olrik 1922: 253-262, 272, 288; Chikovani 1966: 54-52, 67-71; Charachidzé 1986; Hunt 2012: 330-333; Duvakin 2018). In the Chechen story of Pkharmat (Kuryuko in the Ingush version), the hero who stole fire from heaven and brought it to mankind, the god Sela punished Pkharmat by chaining him to a mountain. Each morning Ida, the king of birds comes to the hero and pecks at his liver (Hunt 2012: 343). This story is so close in its structure to the Prometheus myth that influence of Greek myth via printed books in Russian may well be suspected. However similar stories are known to many other ethnic traditions of the Caucasians. There is, for example, an Adyghe legend about the Nart hero Nasran



who brought fire stolen by the gods back to men. The god Paqua chained the hero to the summit of a mountain and ordered his giant eagle to tear Nasran's chest and drink his blood (Colarusso 2002: 159-163). In the Kabardian (East Circassian) tale the hero, having disclosed a secret belonging to Tha (God) is chained to Mount Elbrus, and every day a black kite comes to peck his heart (Miller 1883: 101-102; Dirr 1922: 241-242). According to David Hunt, forty-five different "Prometheus" legends have been identified in the Caucasus (Hunt 2012: 330). All this allows us to suggest that the Prometheus myth in the Caucasus has an autochthonous origin, or that Caucasians' contacts with the Greeks (or other Indo-Europeans) occurred much earlier than Russian literary influence. A feature specific to all Promethean stories is the regularity most clearly presented by the Greek myth: every day a vulture or eagle comes to the hero chained to a pillar in the Caucasian mountains and tears at his liver. During the night the liver grows again, and in the morning the torture begins anew (Graves 1955: 145).

One more region where stories about a chained monster or hero can be found is Central Europe.

- Bavarian blacksmiths strike the anvil three times on the eve of St. Jacob's day at the end of June, because by that day the devil, chained to a rock, had almost sawn through his chain. Before holidays in the Tirol, blacksmiths did the same to secure Lucifer's chains, stopping him breaking free and destroying the world (Miller 1883: 114).
- A pre-Christian variant of these views was preserved in Germany. In some villages the blacksmiths strike the anvil three times to keep inside the terrible wolf chained behind nine iron doors (Miller 1883: 114). The wolf is certainly none other than the Ancient Scandinavian mythic Fenrir who will succeed in freeing himself at the time of Ragnarök. Another similar character is Loki, the trickster in Norse mythology, punished by the gods for his role in engineering the death of Baldr. Loki is bound and left to writhe beneath the mouth of a snake which drops its venom onto his face. His wife Sigyn sits with a bowl to catch the drops, but each time she goes to empty it, the

poison falls on Loki again. His writhing causes earthquakes (Ellis Davidson 1981: 37, 38).

### **The King Asleep in the Mountain (Central and Western Europe)**

Widespread in Central, Northern and Western Europe are legends based on "king under the mountain" or "king asleep in the mountain" motif (D 1960.2 in the Stith Thompson's Motif-Index).

Such are stories of Frederick Barbarossa, Karl the Great, Heinrich the Fowler, Otto the Great, Holger the Dane, King Arthur and other Germanic and Celtic kings and heroes (Krappe 1935: 77-78). Each of them is a national hero who sleeps until the day the country needs him to save or restore it to greatness. They stay in a cave of their own will and do not regularly attempt to get free, but a remarkable regularity of a different kind can be observed.

- Once in a hundred years Karl the Great (Charlemagne) asks a shepherd if ravens still fly round the mountain. When they cease flying and the king's beard can twist three times round the table where he sits, he will leave the cave and join the last battle between good and evil (Grimm 1835: 537-538; Hartland 1891: 213-215). Similar stories were told about Friedrich Barbarossa.
- Every year on Christmas Eve an angel appears before Holger the Dane who sits in a cellar under the Kronborg castle in Elsinore, and the hero asks him: What is going on in Denmark, is everything all right? And the angel says: "Yes, everything is all right, you may sleep on".
- In the legends of King Arthur and many others (e.g., Robert the Bruce, king of Scotland, or Earl Gerald of Mullaghmast, an Irish hero, [see Hartland 1891: 207-212]) we find the same recurrent pattern: a shepherd or an angel regularly visits the king under the mountain, and the king asks him whether it is time for him to come out.

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All the examples cited above indicate that the time in the cave is not linear but cyclic. Regularly, the chain becomes thinner every year, but on the eve of a holiday everything goes back to square one. The mountain splits open regularly on an appointed day, and the hero goes out to look at the world, or a shepherd visits him and answers his questions. The time in the cave is a series of cycles following one after the other. We may call this an example of “eternal return” or describe it by a poetic metaphor of the “Wheel of Time revolving in a cave”. It can therefore be suggested that when the Wheel of Time actually appears in the Armenian and Indian epics, it is a result of a parallel poetic interpretation of some very archaic views linked with caves.

Whether the image of the cave is indeed linked with the idea of “eternal return” or the concept of time understood as a series of cycles can be verified if we introduce material from the two great epics of India, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, never before used in this connection.

### Indian Epic Characters in Caves

- There is for example the story of Paraśurāma, a brahmin-warrior (Mbh 3.115.1–6; 117.16–18). Having exterminated all kṣatriyas (the warrior class), he retires to the Mahendra mountain for good. The word “cave” is absent in the texts, but where else can a hermit live on a mountain? Moreover, he is hidden, nobody can see him. But on the 8th and 14th day of *each* lunar month he makes his appearance to other hermits and pilgrims who gather especially to catch sight of him. Hundreds of years after the time of Paraśurāma’s heroic deeds, the main heroes of the epic, the Pāṇḍava brothers, visit the mountain on the eve of the 14th day and meet him in the morning during their pilgrimage around India. The regularity with which Paraśurāma makes his appearance deserves attention.
- There is one more episode: (Mbh 1.189.9–26) Indra encounters the great God Śiva in the guise of a handsome youth playing a game of dice with Pārvatī at the top of a mountain in the Himalayas. In addressing the unrecognized “youth”, Indra boastfully calls himself “king of the gods” and “master of the universe”, but Śiva

paralyses him and moves the mountain aside. Underneath is a cave in which four of the former Indras, i.e. kings of the gods in previous epochs, are kept imprisoned. All of them were punished like the present Indra, for the sin of pride. Śiva orders the present Indra to join them. All five are to be confined to the cave and sleep there until they are born on earth in the guise of the five Pāṇḍavas. It is only after they have performed great deeds that they will be allowed to return to the celestial world. Notably, the rulers of the five consecutive world epochs enter the cave one after the other. Also remarkable is the fact that Śiva features here as Lord of Time, because the game of dice in the epic is mythically linked with the cycle of seasons and time in general<sup>14</sup>.

- In the 12<sup>th</sup> book of the epic, Śāntiparvan, there are two conversations between Indra (Śakra) and the asura, Bali, the defeated former "Indra" (Mbh 12. 216-217, 220). Bali, having assumed the aspect of a donkey<sup>15</sup>, is chained in a cave. Indra has come to humiliate his predecessor, but Bali stays calm and tells Indra of the almighty Time whose cycles (*paryāya*) determine everything in the world. Bali speaks of thousands of Indras who came before the

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<sup>14</sup>See e.g., Mbh13. 42.25; 43.5, where the image of six seasons (*ṛtavah*) playing dice clearly serves to illustrate the cyclic nature of Time.

<sup>15</sup>It seems that the defeated "king of the gods" (or pretender to this title) who assumes the aspect of an animal is a common Indo-European, or at least Graeco-Aryan marginally retained motif. In one Greek myth, when the son of Tartarus, the monstrous giant Typhon, seized power on Olympus, the gods fled in terror to Egypt, where they assumed animal forms: Zeus became a ram; Apollo, a crow; Ares, a boar and so on. Sometime later Zeus in his own form fought Typhon and was defeated and confined to a cave. Released by the gods, Zeus fought Typhon again until he hurled Mount Aetna on top of his enemy. Typhon was thought to have remained under the mountain, which was shown by a fire that from time to time issues forth from the mountain's cone (Graves 1955: 134). According to the *Mahābhārata* (3. 175-178), the mortal king, Nahuṣa, through his unprecedented sacrifices and austerities obtained sovereignty over the whole universe, i.e. became an Indra, king of the gods. At first a pious and benevolent ruler, he later became inflated with pride and insulted the heavenly Brahmins. They cursed him, and Nahuṣa was hurled down to earth where he had to live in a cave having assumed the form of a huge predatory snake (boa).

present one and tells him that he is bound to lose his power with the next turn of Time.

- There are also parallels to the motif of a character asleep in a cave in Indian epics. In the Rāmāyaṇa Kumbhakarṇa, a brother of Rāma's demonic antagonist Rāvaṇa, is a dreadful monster and voracious cannibal. Together with his brothers, he practices severe austerities (*tapas*) to attain power. Eventually the highest god Brahmā appears to fulfill their wishes. When it is Kumbhakarṇa's turn to ask Brahmā for a reward, the gods fall into panic, since if the gigantic monster obtains additional strength, he will be able to devour all living things in the universe. Therefore Brahmā orders the goddess of Speech, Sarasvatī to enter Kumbhakarṇa's body and change the words in his mouth into a formulation that suits the gods better. When Brahmā asks Kumbhakarṇa what kind of reward he would like to receive, the monster replies reluctantly: "My wish is to sleep for a great number of years". Ever since then Kumbhakarṇa has slept in a cave for six months at a time, after which he eats voraciously for one day, and then goes back to sleep again (Rāmāyaṇa 7. 10.31-41 [Valmiki 2017]; Mbh 3.259.28; Adhyatmarāmāyaṇa 7.2.20-22 [Adhyatmarāmāyaṇa n.d.: 336]).
- Another demonic epic character, *asura* Dhundhu, has so much in common with Kumbhakarṇa that he is directly compared with him in the text of the *Mahābhārata* (Mbh 3.195.26: *kumbhakarṇam ivā 'param* like another Kumbhakarṇa'). Dhundhu performs great austerities and obtains from Brahmā the reward of being invincible to Gods, Dānavas (Asuras), Yakṣas, Gandharvas and Rākṣasas. However, Dhundhu was still unable to overcome and kill his greatest enemy, Viṣṇu. The demon then goes to a desert ("a sea of sand known as Ujjānaka") and begins practicing a unique form of austerity, with the obvious aim of destroying Viṣṇu and devastating the worlds. He goes underground and sleeps there, deep in the sand, waking up and beginning to breathe *at the end of every year*. Then the whole earth begins to tremble, Dhundhu's breath raises clouds of sand and shrouds the sun, and the sparks and flames from his fiery breath

spread far around (Mbh 3.193.14-22; 195.1-33). E.W. Hopkins keenly remarked that Dhundhu “thus appears to be as much of a volcano as the Sicilian giant” (Hopkins 1915: 49), i.e., probably, Typhon under Mount Aetna mentioned in Footnote 16. Another parallel is provided by Iranian Aži Dahāka and Zaḥḥāk under the mountain Demavend.

Each of the Indian epic episodes summarized above contains a motif of cyclic repetition which can be presented by the following chart:

Name	Character	Text	Regularity
Paraśurāma	hero	Mbh	emerges on the 8 <sup>th</sup> and 14 <sup>th</sup> of each month
Indras	kings of the gods	Mbh	replace their predecessors in a position and then appear one by one in the cave under a mountain
Bali	former king of the gods	Rām.	locked and chained in a cave, tells Indra about the inevitable change of rulers in the universe due to the “turns of Time”
Kumbhakarṇa	monster	Mbh	wakes up in his cave for one day every six months
Dhundhu	monster	Mbh	wakes up and moves underground at the end of each year

It can therefore be concluded that Indian epic material supports our proposition: as soon as the image of a cave appears in connection with a mythic or epic character it is associated with time-cycles, “turns of Time”. To explain this I can only suggest that all stories of characters imprisoned or sleeping in a cave are based on the strong link between the image of a cave and the mytho-ritual complex of ideas: “birth – death – rebirth” (Toporov 1992), deeply rooted in human consciousness<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup>In the mythological worldview of hunter-gatherers, which revealed itself for the first time in the Upper Paleolithic cave art, the soul of an animal killed by

### Indo-Europeans and the Caucasus

The association of the cave with cyclical time and the mythological complex of “birth-death-rebirth” seems to have been shared by all branches of humankind. It found its expression in cave burials and also the construction in various parts of the world of artificial ‘caves’ under artificial ‘mountains’ for the bodies of rulers or religious leaders inside, sometimes mummified<sup>17</sup>. But stories of imprisoned mythical monsters or heroes and kings sleeping in caves waiting for their time to emerge, based on the same association, have a more restricted distribution. They were recorded almost exclusively in the Caucasus or territories to the East and West of this area inhabited by speakers of Indo-European languages. If a story belonging to this circle is recorded within a non-Indo-European tradition outside the Caucasus, it is generally a borrowing<sup>18</sup>.

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a hunter returns to the spirit world or to the Master/Mistress of animals in order to be reincarnated in an animal of the same species (Ingold 1986: 243, 246-247; Vitebsky 2006: 262-263; Witzel 2011; Willerslev et al. 2014: 7). In the ritual practice of hunter-gatherer societies, the central role was played by communication with the world of animal spirits with the aim to ensure rebirth of the killed animals. The world of animal spirits was often located in a cave (Eliade 1972: 42; Heyden 2005 [1987]: 1468; Lewis-Williams 1997: 328). There is probably also evidence of practices to ensure rebirth in burials of animals and humans found in ancient caves. The cave was understood as a place where birth, death and rebirth endlessly rotated. Moreover, “since Paleolithic times caves have been preferred places for many rites of passage” (Heyden 2005 [1987]: 1470; Levy 1948: 37-39, 49, 53; Eliade 1972: 46-48, 50-52, 101, 134-136), which connects the caves with the rotation of stages of life and age classes. All this could be conducive to forming a close association in the consciousness of humans between the cave and the notion of time cycles.

<sup>17</sup>Their range is not limited by the pyramids of Egypt or Central America, but includes everything from the megalithic passage tombs of the British Isles like Newgrange, great burrows (*kurgans*) of the Eurasian steppe, and the earliest *stūpas* of India to the present-day mountain- or pyramid-form cavernous mausoleums of embalmed Communist leaders. Even these latest monuments retain in their symbolism a vague idea of resurrection (cf., e.g., Tumarkin 1997).

<sup>18</sup>E.g., in the Kirghiz epic Semetei, son of Manas, does not die but retires to a cave, “where his immortality is shared by his white falcon and faithful horse” (Zhirmunskij 1979: 218). This exceptional case may be explained by the influence on the warriors’ lore and epic tradition of the Turks from the culture of their Iranian-speaking predecessors in the Eurasian steppe (cf., e.g., Rozwadowski 2004: 11).

Tales about heroes, kings and monsters in a cave under the mountain may be called a specific common legacy of Caucasians and Indo-Europeans.

The only way to explain the origin of this common legacy is to assume that it is a result of long-term cultural contacts between Caucasians and Indo-Europeans. A broad distribution of stories about characters confined or sleeping in a cave in various Indo-European traditions excludes the possibility that such contacts could have taken place in connection with any single historical episode of an Indo-European speaking people's penetration into the Caucasus (Scythian migrations over the Caucasus to the Middle East, the Greek colonization of the Black Sea coast etc.). We should sooner relate the initial phase of these contacts to a prehistoric period when the ancestors of the IE speaking peoples constituted a linguistic and cultural unity.

The majority of linguists at present are inclined to assume that in the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze periods the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) language had contacts with Proto-North-Caucasian (PNC), or one of its two (Northwest-Caucasian and Northeast-Caucasian) branches, though there is no real agreement on the nature of these contacts<sup>19</sup>. There is also no common opinion about the region where such contacts could take place, however the generally accepted locale is in the region to the north of the Greater Caucasus mountain range<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup>J. Colarusso derives PIE and Northwest Caucasian from a common proto-language: Proto-Pontic (Colarusso 1992; Colarusso 2019). A.R. Bomhard sees in the PIE the result of the imposition of an Euroasiatic/Indo-Uralic language on "a population speaking one or more primordial Northwest Caucasian languages" (Bomhard 2019: 11). According to F. Kortlandt, the PIE had been originally an Indo-Uralic language which was transformed due to the contacts with not Northwest, but Northeast Caucasian (Kortlandt 2019). S.A. Starostin (1985; 1988 [= Starostin 2009]) argued for massive lexical borrowings by PIE from NWC in situation of their direct contact. R. Matasović finds many examples of borrowing between PIE and NWC in the works of Starostin, Colarusso and Bomhard inconclusive, but demonstrates at the same time exclusive areal-typological parallels in phonology and grammar between PIE and North Caucasian which lead him to conclude that "PIE was, indeed, in contact with languages of the northern Caucasus" (Matasović 2012: 24-25).

<sup>20</sup>Deviations emerge in connection with alternative hypotheses of the IE homeland. S. Starostin, following the ideas of T. Gamkrelidze and V. Ivanov (Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1995 [Russian edition – 1984]), thought that contacts



It is at this place and time, we suggest, that stories about characters confined or retired in caves in the process of cultural contact would become for the first time the shared property of Indo-Europeans and Caucasians<sup>21</sup>.

The high concentration and exceptional variability of plots and motifs under discussion in the Caucasus permits the suggestion that their place of origin must be established here, in the mountains, while the Indo-Europeans who came into contact with the Caucasians somewhere in the northern foothills, were the "receiving side".

Linguistic contacts between Indo-Europeans and Caucasians continued after the disintegration of PIE. I am tempted to make a reference here to my own paper (Vasilkov 1994) written after several summer seasons on an archaeological expedition at the Novosvobodnaya (Klady) site in Adyghea. A comparison of the Novosvobodnaya funeral rite with the building of a tomb under a barrow (*śmaśāna*), described in the Late Vedic *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* (13.8.1-4 [Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa 1900: 421-440]), has revealed a striking parallelism. A typical Novosvobodnaya tumulus with a chamber-tomb inside reveals such a large number of correspondences that it may be regarded as a physical illustration of the Vedic description. Parallels with certain elements of Novosvobodnaya art and its mythological motifs were found in ancient Greek, Indian and Iranian traditions. This gives us some grounds to suggest that the language of the

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between PIE and PNC could have taken place only to the south of the Caucasus in the hypothetical Anatolian homeland of both PIE and the North Caucasian languages (Starostin 1985: 89). A group of scholars (Kassian 2010: 425-427; Duvakin 2018; 2018a) looks for the contact zone in the Balkans where an IE homeland had been first localized by I.M. Diakonov (1985).

<sup>21</sup>Recently E.N. Duvakin in a comparative study of a group of "Promethean" motifs (Duvakin 2018; Duvakin 2018a) made a similar suggestion: folklore parallels between Caucasian and Ancient Classical (Greek and Latin) mythological traditions may "reflect the relationships between early Indo-European and North Caucasian-speaking tribes which are supported by lexical evidence". The only difference with my approach is that E.N. Duvakin, following A. Kassian (2010), locates the zone of these early contacts in the "Carpatho-Balkan area".

Novosvododnaya culture belonged probably to the above-mentioned Greek-Armenian-Indo-Iranian dialect group<sup>22</sup>.

Linguists have traced some borrowings from the North Caucasian languages in separate IE languages, descendants of the PIE: Hittite, Proto-Greek, Proto-Italic, Proto-Indo-Aryan, Iranian and Eastern Iranian (Nikolaev 1985; Kullanda 2012). Archaeologists believe that (Proto-) Iranians were neighbors of North Caucasians from very early times (2<sup>nd</sup> mill. BC, if not earlier [cf. Chlenova 1984]). They and other IE-speaking tribes on many occasions could have penetrated from their hypothetical original or secondary homeland in the western region of the Eurasian Steppe across the Caucasus into Asia Minor and the Middle East. Those scholars who locate the IE homeland in the Near or Middle East argue for migrations across the Caucasus in the opposite direction (see e.g., Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1995: 811-814; Kozintsev 2016; Reich 2018: 120; Wang et al. 2018: lines 647-551; Kozintsev 2019: 345-348, 352-354 [Fig. 1]). Of special importance are results of a recent paleogenetic study (Wang et al. 2018) which reveal that the Caucasus Mountains were not an insurmountable barrier, but rather a corridor or bridge to human population movements in prehistory. There is clear archaeological evidence of intensive intercultural contacts via the Greater Caucasus in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age periods (Skakov 2011: 124). The migrations of Scythians over the Caucasus to the Middle East and Asia Minor prove that the corridor was open in historical times too. Indo-Europeans who penetrated repeatedly into this mountainous region could become acquainted with new versions of stories about characters chained/confined/sleeping in caves, and make their own creative contribution to the ancient legacy they shared with the peoples of the Caucasus.

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<sup>22</sup>The language of the Maykop culture proper in the opinion of some scholars was most probably (Proto-) North Caucasian (Kassian 2010: 427; cf.: Starostin 1985: 89; Antony 2007: 297). Therefore I hope that it is not too bold to imagine that the Novosvododnaya-Maykop symbiosis could be a bilingual society similar to the Sumero-Akkadian, Hittite-Hattic or Hurro-Aryan in Mitanni.

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